



## Crystal Palace v Arsenal - Match Preview

By Rob Kelly

### THE QUOTE

"There's a good understanding and collective desire, and that unity will be key for us. We know we are in front of three important months in our lives and we want to commit to doing well." - Arsène Wenger

### THE SET-UP

This week has had the feel of the calm before the storm for Arsenal.

After Sunday's emphatic victory against Middlesbrough, the past five days have been relatively stress-free for Arsène Wenger's side as they prepare for the final furlongs in another marathon season.

Wenger pre-Palace



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While progression to the FA Cup quarter-finals was the ultimate goal last weekend, the swashbuckling nature of the Gunners' display was particularly encouraging - especially with sterner tests on the immediate horizon.

From **Gabriel**'s composed debut at the back, through to the dazzling combination play between **Mesut Ozil**, **Santi Cazorla** and Alexis, and topped off by **Olivier Giroud**'s well-taken brace, it was a complete performance that the scoreline did not truly reflect.

Yet for all the individual brilliance on offer, it was what he saw from the group as a whole that satisfied Wenger most as he rallies them for the final push.

"We had a good performance overall and a strong result," the manager told Arsenal Player. "I'm pleased with the way we approached the game, the way we started and the spirit as well. It's about the quality of our team play and the pace of our game, the structure of our game, the way we pass the ball - our collective game was very pleasing."

## ARSENAL

Following a double that took him to 10 goals in 18 games this season, the scales finally seem to have fallen from the eyes of many with regards to Giroud.

The France international has long flown under the radar in England, rarely mentioned as being among the Premier League's top strikers despite a prolific two-and-a-half season spell that has taken him to one shy of 50 Arsenal goals.

But with his importance growing exponentially with each passing week, recognition has finally arrived. And while statistics rarely tell the full picture, one set of figures makes for particularly compelling reading.

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*Arsène Wenger*

In Giroud's first season in England, his strike rate was one goal every 2.75 games - now it stands at one every 1.8. That is some improvement.

"I want those numbers to go down even more - he can do one in one," Wenger said. "When you look at the numbers of the top strikers now, they approach 1.1, 1.2 and I think Olivier has the quality to get there.

"The timing of runs in the box is important and he has improved a lot on that. He has improved on the quality of his finishing as well and let's not forget that he's surrounded by players who can contribute, who can create crosses, give final balls and then feed your strikers with quality. In our team he gets that.

"What is more important as well, I believe he has improved his team play and his link play. He works hard for the team and not many strikers in Europe work as hard as Olivier does for the team. Even if his numbers are excellent, as long as he continues to contribute to the team I'm very happy."

While the France international should start on Saturday, Wenger will be without **Aaron Ramsey** (hamstring), **Mikel Arteta** (calf) and **Mathieu Debuchy** (shoulder). The only other issues involve **Hector Bellerin** (ankle) and **Mathieu Flamini** (hamstring), with both players due to face late fitness tests.

## THE OPPOSITION

Arsenal will head to Crystal Palace in good spirits on Saturday, buoyed by both history and current form. They are unbeaten in their last 11 visits to Selhurst Park, winning six and drawing five, while they have not lost any of their past 10 matches against the Eagles.

But, as their last-gasp victory on the opening day of the season showed, games against Palace are often far from straightforward. And with Alan Pardew at the helm, and a vociferous home crowd to contend with, Wenger acknowledges that his side face a big test of their credentials.

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*Arsène Wenger*

"Crystal Palace have a compact unit, they are always quick to go forward and counter-attack with players like Bolasie, Punccheon, Zaha, Campbell, Gayle and Chamakh," he said.

"Let's not forget they have Sanogo there as well, so they are a good offensive force and a good crowd. It's a tight pitch as well - the atmosphere is a bit like Highbury. That's why it is special and it's difficult for everybody."

One of the more noteworthy features of Palace's season has been Marouane Chamakh's reinvention as an attacking midfielder, and Wenger is pleased to see the former Gunner

performing so well.

“I’m happy that he’s found his position in the team and he’s doing well. He has an outstanding mentality,” he said. “He’s always been a worker type. I think he’s an outstanding guy and he has top qualities as well as being a real team player.”

## SUMMARY

With two thirds of the season gone, the jostling for position at the top of the Premier League is getting ever more intense as the finish line appears in view.

Holding your nerve is essential, and at this Arsenal have become past masters. Wenger knows how to get his squad into position to time their run to perfection, and a hot streak of seven wins in eight suggests that this is what is happening right now.

With battles raging across the squad for first-team berths, competition is bringing the best out of the group - and that bodes well for what is bound to be a tense finale to the campaign.

“We have options, especially now at the back and up front,” Wenger said. “Maybe in midfield we are a bit shorter but we have players coming back so the options are there. It’s fierce competition in every single position. That’s good.

“Our quality, the principles we respect in the way we want to play and the united force we have in the squad [make me confident]. There’s a good understanding and collective desire, and that unity will be key for us. We know we are in front of three important months in our lives and we want to commit to doing well.”

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